

Costume, Make-Up and Props as Conveyors of Culture in Nollywood

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Abstract

This paper interrogates how the use of costume, make-up and props in Nollywood aid in situating the films within a culture. Film art is a cultural product which propagates and instils the culture of its origin to the viewer. It does this through the use of costume, make-up and props which help to establish the background of the narrative. *Aguba* (2004), a Nollywood film will be used for analysis and discussion in this study. Anchored in Social Semiotic Theory, the article uses descriptive and analytical methods to explicate the use of costume, make-up and props in *Aguba*. The findings reveal that costume, make-up and props situate films to a particular culture as it is the case in the film under study. The paper concludes that costume, make-up and props is used to convey cultural information in *Aguba*. We, therefore, recommend that costume, make-up and props should be discerned as the most visible channel through which we propagate and document the people's identity, using it to showcase cultures and values.

Keywords: Costume, Culture, Make-Up, Narrative, Nollywood, Props.

Introduction

Nollywood films are films shot with Nigerian culture as the background of the narrative or the characters. The background culture of the narrative can be expressed by localizing the content and form of the narrative with

relevant props, costume, make-up, language and nomenclature of things, places and characters. A thorough blend of the content and form helps to establish the locale of the narrative thereby furnishing the background information firmly. Culture here encompasses all aspects of human existence. One of the hallmarks of Nigerian films is the portrayal of the different Nigerian cultural themes in their storylines. Culture is seen as the sum total of the way of life of a people. This includes their belief system, trade, art, social activities, institutions, and every other aspect of their existence. Haviland (2002) defines culture as “a set of shared ideals, values, and standards of behaviour.” This means that culture is a common denominator which makes the actions of individuals mutually intelligible among members of a homogenous society and gives meaning to their lives. Ngugi wa Thiong’o sees it as: a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment. It is the sum of their art, their science and all their social institutions; including their system of beliefs and rituals... such values are often expressed through the people’s songs, dances, folklore, drawing, sculpture, rites and ceremonies... (as cited in Doki, 2009).

In other words, culture includes the values, beliefs, arts, and other standards used by a people to interpret experiences and behaviours within them which give meaning to their lives. Uwah (2013) affirms that “culture is all about ‘living’ and the manner of doing things in the society. It refers to the manner in which activities are carried out by people... culture is all about identity, behaviours, mannerisms, rituals, actions and modes of being and doing things in the society.” Also, the culture of a people includes their climate, vegetation, occupation, craft, music, dance, dressing pattern, song, marriage system, family set up system, religious system, anthropology, architecture, the food they eat and how they eat it, market system in terms of buying and selling, settlement pattern, greetings and also the language they speak.

Film art is a phenomenon which embodies in every ramification, all aspect of the culture of a given people. Even when the film is set in an imaginary setting and background, it presents a totality of the culture as presented in the narrative context. Though writing on stage experience, Ododo (2015) argues that: every experience is best appreciated and valued within a socio-cultural context. Even though there may be cross-cultural persuasions, the final shape, content and value of (...) experience are determined by the cultural perceptions and expectations ... in terms of their unique elements to arrive at some aesthetic decisions. The

meaning these elements hold ... within their cultural sensibilities should therefore be a major factor in determining the ... extent that it refurbishes their belief systems and reinforces their socio-cultural values.

Film is a cultural product and, therefore, it must reflect the culture of its origin. The cultural background of film is enunciated through the use of costume, make-up and props that are apt in affirming the culture being represented. Every culture has its perceptions and expectations in terms of dress culture, body-art (make-up) and properties that furnish the ideologies of the society (Bakare, 2010). It is the duty of the filmmaker to encode his/her images using costume, make-up and props in such a way that they carry meaning within the film's cultural context. For it is only in its cultural context can a film be fully appreciated.

Costume, Make-up and Props as Cultural Aesthetics Markers in Film

Costume, make-up and props provide the aesthetics of the socio-cultural background of film narratives, situating them to a particular culture or another. They furnish the narration with tangible markers of cultural aesthetics of the film's background. Costumes are clothes or dresses worn by the actor(s) while playing a role in film or any other type of performance (Bakare, 2010). The purpose of costume in film is to aid characterization as well as communicate some subtle meanings about the narrative to the viewer. Make-up on the other hand is the art of using substances to enhance or transform the appearance of the actor(s) to suit the character he/she is playing. Furthermore, props are physical objects used as part of the mise-en-scene. Bature-Uzor (2018) asserts that props simply mean "properties." They are properties used in film narrative that provide clues about the personality, socio-economic status, religion, background/locale, age, sex, and every other information that may be needed about the character or the narrative itself. Props may be hand props (handled physically by the actor), set props (as part of the set construction like furniture) or decorative props (props used as decoration for the set like artefacts). Together, costume, make-up and props form the ideology of what we refer to as the cultural aesthetics, providing background to each of the films.

In Nollywood, films that represent the culture of each ethnic group are presented as narratives whose storylines are embellished in the lifestyle of members of the particular ethnic group. Costumes, make-up and props provide the cultural aesthetics for these narratives situating them to a particular ethnic group or the other. On this note, Nollywood

films up until recent times have been applauded for representing the different cultures found in the Nigerian society through their narrative context and content. These representations are not achieved through speech alone. The communication process involves using artefacts and other forms of non-verbal communication system peculiar to the film medium. The artefacts locate a narrative to a particular culture, thereby aiding the viewer's interpretation and appreciation of the narrative. The non-verbal systems of communication in film includes location, set, scenery, props, costume, make-up, lighting, sound, music and editing. These are what situate the narratives within a particular culture. For films, apart from the storyline, it is the environment (location) and the mise-en-scene that provide the geographical background to the narration.

The costumes, make-up and props are part of the means through which culture and semiotics construct the meaning making processes in film production in contemporary social sites, creating identity and background/locale for both the character(s) and the narrative. According to Bezemer and Kress (2016)...to understand the constantly transformative and innovative character of human meaning-making (...), then all means used in making meaning will need to be recognized. All signs will need to be taken seriously, regardless of who made the sign, or in what mode; its valuation in the environment in which it was produced will need to be examined and understood. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the extent costume, make-up and props are used to convey the ideology of Igbo culture in Nollywood. Costumes are apparels adorned by the actor(s) while playing his/her role in film narrative. They include anything that can cover the nudity of the actor though the basic materials are mostly fabrics. The type of costume and the design, the texture of the material of the costume and the manner (style) the actor wears the costume are all included in the sign system of the film's narration. This buttresses the fact that costume in film narration plays far more important role than just a dress for the actor. Costumes provide the physical and tangible characterizations to the character(s) by bringing to life the screenwriter's imaginative creations as identifiable personalities/character(s) for the viewer.

Make-up on the other hand is the art of using objects and/or substances to transform the physical appearance of an actor/actress for the purpose of characterization. In most narratives, make-up plays a subordinate role by helping costume to complete the appearance required for each characterization. In that case, make-up provides the extra details

that stand a character out in his/her unique self. For example, even when the narrative is about nurses or police officers, each of the characters may have a peculiar way of wearing his/her facial make-up or cap. This little detail will stand him/her personality out among the others. Because of the altering or enhancement of the individual's personality, make-up can actually influence the meaning of an image on screen. Through costume, make-up and props, a filmmaker can express several ideas to the spectator. They can suggest a character's background/locale of the narrative; the character(s) profession, age/sex; economic/social status; mood of the character(s)/the narrative itself; period/time of the narrative; and above all, the different characterizations in the narrative. In some films, make-up may appear as body-arts. Hence, body-art, like all arts is a chronicle of elements and ways of life of a given society. It is a vocabulary of their values and belief system. Body-art can embody the ideology that transmits other codes within a group or society. This ideology is what makes the individual a part of the continuum (Bature-Uzor, 2017).

Body-art as make-up can also be a pointer to an individual's background in terms of cultural or religious affiliation. In this regard, Michel Thevoz claims that body-art constitutes "a regular reminder of roots, like myths and in conformity with myths" (as cited in Geoffroy-Schneiter, 2001). Furthermore, props refer to physical properties used in the narrative. Proper use of props makes the narrative authentic by placing the narrative in the realm of realism. Generally, the cultural aesthetics markers like costumes, make-up and props used in Nollywood films are found among the everyday clothing, fashion and environment in Nigeria. When they are used in film production, they assume functions which ordinarily they may not have had in everyday usage. They become a sign; a form of communicative tool. Charity Perve-Ge citing Petr Bogatyrev asserts that "on the stage, things (...) acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life" (as cited in Asiegbu, 2015). This is particularly true of non-verbal signs in film productions. However, the conventions of the industry or the group determine the attributes or meanings that can be given to an object. The film medium has its recognized modes and standards of representation. The signs and modes of usage are familiar to the practitioners and are imbedded with latent connotative meanings which the images are laden with. According to Umberto Eco, "there is a sign every time a human group decides to use and to recognize something as the vehicle of something else." To buttress this point, he further asserts that "everything

can be understood as a sign if and only if there is a convention which allows it to stand for something else..." (Eco, 1976). Convention, therefore, guides the use of costume, make-up and props in film signification.

Costume, Make-up, props and Cultural Aesthetics in Nollywood Films

Nollywood films are narratives shot within Nigeria and (or) showcasing the different lifestyles of the ethnic groups in Nigeria through the representation of the different cultures. For some writers, it may also include films from other West African countries, especially Ghana. But Ghana has its film industry that strives to represent the Ghanaian culture to the world (Omoera & Okwuowulu, 2021). Nollywood films carry stereotyped visual codes of recurring symbolic images that induce meanings from the lifestyle and culture of the Nigerian citizenry; film being a product of culture. These visual codes are mainly seen as they manifest in location/furnishing, different categories of props, costumes and make-up. They form the cultural aesthetic markers through which the filmmaker encodes and sends his/her message to the viewer. In Nollywood, costumes, sets/locations, props and make-up furnish the imagery for the narrative's background as well as genre categorization. The costumes, props and make-up are parts of cultural semiotic means and processes available for the filmmaker for creating meanings in film production within the ambience of a particular culture. They are used to create identity and background/locale for both the character(s) and the narrative itself.

Most Nollywood films are committed to ethnic interests through the process Bezemer and Kress (2016) refer to as "transformative engagement." By this process, viewers learn about the interests, lifestyle, arts, personalities and values of the culture the film is portraying. Transformative engagement influences the meanings we read to the content and context we encounter in films. White (2014) asserts that the video film is structured like the storytelling sessions going on in the villages for many years. The stories begin with conflicts and tensions with the values of the community. These conflicts come from the tensions of greed, disregard of family members, political intrigue, and evil witchcraft which are all offshoot of western civilization. The heroic and the courageous individuals gather to bring decency and reconciliation. So often, the process of reconciliation takes the plot back to the village, where revered elders enjoin the community for an African modernity to emerge. Following White's position above, it can be seen that the different ethnic

groups that make up Nigeria portray such characteristics and lifestyles that are peculiar to their ethnic culture, using artefacts and resources available within their environment. As already noted, aspects of culture are represented in film through the appropriate use of the cultural aesthetics markers that signify meanings within the film's context and the culture being represented. Costume, make-up and props in film show the intrinsic relationship and the connectedness of the narrative to a particular or given culture. They, therefore, become meaning-makers; pointers to the meanings encoded in the different shots, scenes and sequences in film narratives. Their objectives are tied around signifying in a signification process which film is all about; thus, a cultural and semiotic means; a process available for making meanings in film.

All over the world, people are visually identified through their physical appearances. In film narratives, costume, make-up and props provide the physical appearances required for the visual identification of these film images. For this reason, reading a film's cultural aesthetics markers deals with a lot of what Juan Magarinos de Morentin (2011) terms "visual semiotics." Visual semiotics interrogates what is shown and how it is shown in a signification process. The concern of this discourse is to read the objects that are used as cultural aesthetics markers; and, therefore, as visual signs that convey the cultural background of the narratives under discussion. As such, they are viewed as cultural icons which help to denote and form the background in the film text, situating it within the Igbo cultural environment. Bezemer and Kress (2016) claim that in the overarching and integrating theory of social semiotics, the core questions are those about meaning and *meaning-making*, about the *resources* for meaning-making, about social agents as *meaning-makers* and about the characteristics of the *environments* in which they act. Essentially in all of these is the rhetorically oriented focus on *agency, audiences, resources*

It is important that the meanings of the objects within the culture being represented and the significance of the items are understood to make meaningful interpretation of the images. The objects here are the costume, make-up and props which are the *resources* and *meaning-makers* in narrative films. The *environment* is expected to be provided by set and location and together, they form a cultural base for the narrative. Culture as observed earlier is the totality of human life: dressing, foods, environment, social, economics, heritage and every other aspect of human existence. Human life then can be read through costume, make-up and props as exemplified in film narratives. For transformative engagement to

be effective, the filmmaker must understand how to effectively apply the variants to ensure accurate visual semiotics that will create the different meanings the viewer is expected to attribute to the objects in film. The meanings of such creation are hinged within a culture which eventually forms the film's cultural context and background.

The Nollywood Cultural Thesis

Nollywood film narratives embody images that are replete with cultural icons that represent the environment underpinning the visual semiosis. If the "core questions are those about meaning and *meaning-making*, about the *resources* for meaning-making, about social agents as *meaning-makers* and about the characteristics of the *environments*" as Bezemer and Kress claim, the onus is to understand how Nollywood filmmakers use the resources available in the environment as meaning-making agents. In trying to undertake the understanding of the semiotic resources and their meaning-making potentials within a community, considerations are given to how these resources are structured in the meaning-making processes. It is worthy to note that the resources (meaning-makers) do not work in isolation from the environment. In this case, we are looking at costume, make-up and props (which are meaning-makers) as used to make meanings within a narrative text.

Kolker (2006) asserts that "form and meaning make sense only when we examine their intersections in all their complexity (...) No one element can be taken for granted. The whole is made of its parts, and each part responds to the other." In terms of film costume and make-up, a dress, hairstyle or an item of dress accessories does not function in isolation. It is read in relation to the entire scenery, action, and in relation to the other characters in the scene. Likewise are props and scenery which also present a background for the narration and the entire actions in the narrative text. The resources or agencies are not to be treated in isolation, rather in relation to the whole narrative to get the real meaning within an environment. It is only as one whole mode that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning. Consequently, the filmmaker structures the meaning-making resources available to him or her in a way that resources are not presented as isolated incongruous images with isolated meanings.

Synopsis of *Aguba*

Aguba (2002) is an epic narrative produced by Afam Okeke. The screenplay and directing credit go to Ifeanyi Onyeabor. The narrative is set in the hinterland Igbo community (Umunta) around the pre-colonial and colonial traditional society. It presents the story of a woman who challenges the patriarchal traditions, by defeating the ideology and replacing it with hers. She threatened the existence of male supremacy, though at the end she was destroyed by her own greed. The film opens with some montage shots detailing some earlier events to form background information for the narrative. *Aguba* (Patience Ozokwor) is an only child and an orphan. Her father was killed by the gods for stealing from the shrine, while her mother committed suicide. She was brought up by relatives and well-wishers. By interaction probably with wealthy merchants, *Aguba* becomes a wealthy slave trader herself with remarkable influence in politics and communal affairs. She started terrorizing the community and the leaders, having the support of the Consul (Amechi Muonagor). The Igwe's (Pete Ene's) effort to control her lands him in trouble. *Aguba's* guards kidnap him. *Aguba* kills the Igwe and makes herself the new ruler of the community. With the help of the community deity, some young men dethrone *Aguba* and install the late Igwe's son as the ruler of Umunta.

A Social Semiotic Reading of Costume, Make-up and Props in *Aguba*

Looking at costumes, props and settings used in *Aguba*, one may read a variety of meanings out of the ensemble. From the plot, storyline and the overall content of the narrative, the setting of *Aguba* is established as the Eastern part of Nigeria and Igboland to be precise. Having this in mind, the costumes, props and sets will be considered against the background of the narrative which is Igbo culture. Culture defines a people, and it is the mark of identity that distinguishes one group from another. Costumes, make-up and props are part of the markers of culture and they represent the *meaning-making agencies* and *meaning-makers* in film narratives. Their meanings are most times subject to the *environment* provided in the narrative context. For *Aguba*, the costumes, make-up and props played important role in setting the narrative. Ordinarily, this narrative can be set in any background using the appropriate meaning-makers and the story will still make meaning to whichever audience it is intended for. Social semiotics is all about how societies express and communicate using resources available to their culture and environment. Film art thrives on

the indices of social semiotics in communicating with the viewers. Filmmakers understand this so well that they depend so much on the resources provided by culture to encode meanings in their narratives. They anchor on the fact that the culture of a people may not be easily separated from their politics, social life, economic activities, artistry, food, dress culture, among other aspects. In *Aguba*, costumes, props and settings are expected to be used generally as meaning-making agents, situating the narrative in Igbo cultural background. There are some disparities noticeable in the costumes of some of the characters in terms of authenticity to the Igbo culture, but an overall surface assessment will acknowledge closeness to the Igbo dress culture.



Image 1. Elders



Image 2. Villagers

For example, in the two frames here, the costumes present a typical dressing style of the Igbos at the dawn of Christianity and civilization. The dressing styles of the elders as seen in image 1 can still be found among the Igbo-speaking communities living along the banks of River Niger (the Ika Igbos) in the present-day Delta State of Nigeria. It also shows the ceremonial dress style of titled men in Igbo culture of the South East around the period the narrative is presenting. Costume, therefore, is the outward visible sign that informs the viewer about the situations and actions in a film text. Consequently, image 2 also presents the dressing style of women and children in the South East within the period of 1930s and 1940s. It is important to note the visual authenticity created in these images with the background sets which represent the architectural style found in Eastern Nigeria around the 1920s to 1960s.

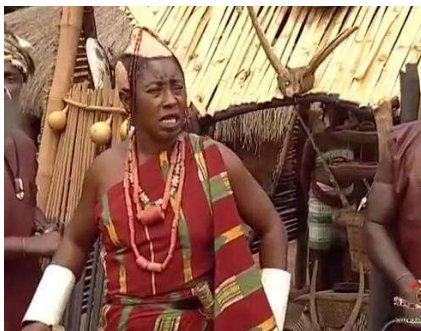


Image 3 Aguba Igogoro



Image 4 Aguba Igogoro

On the other hand, one cannot fully claim that the costumes in images 3 and 4 above are markers of Igbo cultural dress style. Apart from the “Odu” (the hand and leg ornaments of elephant tusks) which is an insignia worn by titled women in Onitsha society of Anambra State and Anioma, which is part of the present Ika Igbos of Delta State for instance, Aguba’s costumes in these two images do not represent the cultural background of this narrative. Aguba is the lead character in this film, but her dress style in the two images and throughout the narration seems alien to Igbo cultural dressing style. There is no explanation in the course of the narration to justify the choice or style of dressing. A close scrutiny of her costumes will reveal an affiliation with the Iria dressing style found among the Kalabari and Okirika peoples of Rivers State, Nigeria. This is also manifest in her headgear and other costume accessories like her coral bead. These patterns of accessories are still in use among the Kalabari and Okirika dressing style at present.



Image 5 Aguba’s Guards



Image 6 King and his Guards

Furthermore, in terms of using costume, make-up and props as resources for meaning-making in this particular film, the guards and the warriors in images 5 and 6 present a confusing interpretation of the background of the narrative to the viewer. Costumed in reminiscence of the Zulu warriors of South Africa with spears, swords, animal skin, headgears, hand and leg accessories, these warriors and guards' costumes represent warriors of the Zulu people of the South African region. The headgear of the king and that of the warriors are particularly alien to the Igbos of the period in the narration. The king's warriors' costumes and props (spears) are a reflection of the Ipitombi dancers' costume from the South African culture.



Image 7



Image 8

The scenes in images 7 and 8 show a potpourri of various costumes and hairstyles by men and women in the village. The young girls in image 7 with their jigida (waist beads) and pattern of wearing their wrapper on the waist and chest areas are remarkably different from the married women and mothers seen in image 8. Barranger (2002) asserts that costume tells us many things about the character's nature, mood and style of the play. As visual signs, they add colour, style, and meaning to the play's environment, establishing period, social class, economic status, occupation, age, geography, weather, and time of day. They also help to clarify relationships and importance of various characters, using ornaments, lines, and colours as signs to create ties and groups within the narrative world. Changes in costume can signal changes in alliances among characters or changes in a character's psychological state. Sympathetic and antagonistic relationships can also be indicated through similarities and contrasts in costumes (Barranger, 2002). The various

groups in the two images are distinguished through the use of costume and make-up.



Image 9



Image 10

On another hand, images 9 and 10 above present props and set that situate the narrative within the Igbo culture. Earthenware pots, wooden utensils, different shapes of local baskets from palm trees, and fireplace that speak volume of the cultural background of the narrative are on display. The food culture of the people is also evidently represented in image 10. Cassava flakes (abacha), yam tubers and the pumpkin (anyu) are all part of the food culture of the people of the Eastern Nigeria.



Image 11



Image 12

In the images here, costume and make-up are used in categorizing the characters according to their social and economic statuses. Aguba who is the lead character, the wealthiest in the narrative context, can be seen remarkably different even from the king. Her props and costume accessories help to elevate the visual signs of wealth and power.

According to Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy in his poem *De Arte Graphica*, the quality of the persons is also to be considered in the drapery. As supposing them to be magistrate, their draperies ought to be large and ample: If country clowns or slaves, they ought to be coarse and short; if ladies or damsels, light and soft (as cited in Umukoro, 2004). Similarly, Jean-Loup Bourget (1986) asserts that costume can be used to define social functions. He argues that “stylistically, social functions are indicated by emblems (folkloric costumes, pointed helmets, plumes), which look slightly ridiculous.” The ornaments (props), costume and make-up used for Aguba, the king, the guards, the warriors and the villagers in the narrative place each character within social and economic groups they belong to.

Conclusion

Culture determines what constitute sign through conventions and agreed modes of communication. Film communication is dependent on social meanings attached to objects for the meaning-making process as we have seen in the social semiotic X-raying of *Aguba*. It is by embedding meaning through images as signs in a narrative text that whatever meaning intended comes to the fore. To determine the cultural underpinning of a narrative text, we require a systematic understanding of the social meanings of the *meaning-makers, resources* and *agents* used by the filmmaker as they form the semiotic resources of the community.

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